

Freeport Lincoln-Douglas Debate of August 27, 1858

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In the year 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen A. Douglas ran against each other for a seat in the U. S. Senate. Lincoln was the Republican candidate. His views, which mirrored those of his party, were for slavery's containment due to its moral wrongs. Douglas was the Democratic candidate. Douglas was pro-states' rights, against the establishment of national bank, and for the use of popular sovereignty to decide upon slavery. The two men debated in seven cities in Illinois during the year. The format of the debates included an opening speech of one hour, the reply, one hour and a half; the close, half an hour. The main topic of the debates was the topic that most divided these parties and the country at the time: slavery.

The second debate in the series took place in Freeport, Illinois. The crowd was "fully fifteen thousand" and had "come to see the fight," according to an early-twentieth century historian. The spectator majority held Republican, and so had abolitionist or anti-slavery views. Lincoln opened the debate. He answered seven questions that were put to him by Douglas at the Ottawa debate, the prior debate. After giving initial, brief answers to all of the questions, Lincoln went back and answered each question in depth.

One of the questions regarded the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. Lincoln said that he would be "exceedingly glad to see slavery abolished in the District of Columbia." He would only stand for it, however, if the change was gradual, to a majority's vote, and compensated those that would sustain loss. This idea stood out because it showed that Lincoln did not want an instant change that would bring turmoil to

the country. He wanted the issue to end well.

After the opening session, Lincoln attacked Douglas with several counter questions over various issues. Lincoln then said that Douglas used “evil genius” to achieve his accomplishments. After this attack, Lincoln discussed the issue that Douglas “voted down the Chase amendment to ‘leave room’ for the Dred Scott decision.” (The Dred Scott case involved a slave who was denied freedom by a court of law because the Constitution gave no rights to slaves. This case became a basis for many of the arguments about slavery.)

After Lincoln’s opening, Douglas spoke. He answered Lincoln’s questions, first addressing the issue of Kansas, saying “she has people enough for a free state.” After receiving cheers, Douglas answered another question. He said that “the people of a territory can, by lawful means, exclude slavery from their limits prior to the formation of a State Constitution. This statement became known as the “Freeport Doctrine.” It lost Douglas support of many Southern slave owners. Douglas believed that each state should have the right to decide about slavery. After answering questions, Douglas spoke.

Douglas spoke on various topics. He spoke to the crowd about African American equality. He stated that “those of you [the crowd-members] who believe that the negro is your equal. . . have a right to entertain those opinions.” The crowd angrily rejected this. Douglas then defended his beliefs, addressing the crowd on issues such as induction of new territories. After defending his own claims, Douglas also made fun of Lincoln’s answers, pointing out that Lincoln “was not pledged” to his beliefs. Finally, Douglas supported himself, saying that if “State constitutions ought to be submitted to the people before the admissions of the State into the Union,” he would firmly support it. Douglas

finished just as time expired, saying that Lincoln only wanted to divide the Democratic Party so as to get into the U. S. Senate.

At last, Lincoln gave his rejoinder. The audience was at that point “eager and hot,” according to one historian. Lincoln began by boldly saying that if any member of legislature believed that Lincoln was inconsistent with his beliefs, as Douglas said he was, he would “retire from the race.” Lincoln expressed his belief that having a single slave station in the country would not establish the whole nation as pro-slavery. To end his rejoinder, Lincoln addressed Douglas. He said that Douglas, even though he was trying to make progress in the North, was failing and would one day be forced to unite with those he fought. As time ended, Lincoln was loudly applauded and support was declared for Lincoln.

The Freeport debate was one of powerful, assertive questioning, answering, and accusation by the two men. The views and opinions of each man were very much exposed in the debate. The mentality of a compromise between slavery and anti-slavery views by Douglas was shown. Lincoln’s overall anti-slavery mentality was also exposed. The debate was fueled by slavery, the subject in America about whose monstrosities and the difficulty of solving people were made aware.

Lincoln and Douglas held six other debates throughout the state of Illinois. The debate over the issue of slavery continued after the debates. Although Douglas won the election, the debates were also successful for Lincoln. He gained national recognition and notice for his anti-slavery views. The debates helped Lincoln to develop the reputation that would later get him into the White House. [From Albert J. Beveridge, *Abraham Lincoln 1809-1858*; Francis Browne, *The Every-day Life of Abraham Lincoln*;

Don E. Fehrenbacher, ed., *Abraham Lincoln*; Ira Krakow, “What Were the Lincoln-Douglas Debates About?” *The United States Constitution by Ira Krakow*
<<http://www.irakrakov.com/constitution/category/lincoln-douglas-debates/>> (Oct. 18, 2007); and Andrew Pinzler, The Ethical Culture Fieldston School. “The Lincoln-Douglas Debates (1858).” *The Fieldston School United States History Survey*
<<http://www.pinzler.com/ushistory/lindougsupp.html>> (Oct. 14, 2007).]